

*ALOIS HÁBA: A CATALOGUE OF MUSIC AND WRITINGS*

by Lubomír Spurný and Jiří Vysloužil

Koniasch Latin Press, Prague (2010)

Alois Hába is certainly one of the best known Czech avant-garde composers of the first half of the twentieth century. He is usually characterized as one of the leading protagonists of the Central European interwar avant-garde movement, mostly due to his reputation as a tireless propagator of the quarter-, fifth- and sixth-tone music. His microtonal and athematic music, which he himself designated as “liberated music”, was considered extremely modern in his time. However, his entire musical opus has much brighter musico-poetic characteristics. Although in the specific context of Czech music in the inter-war period Hába had the reputation of being an extreme innovator, he is considered to have been strongly rooted in tradition as well.

Hába’s dream of the unlimited possibilities of new music lasted for approximately twenty years, between 1919 and 1939, and found expression in a series of pieces that vacillate between the diatonic and bi-chromatic systems. He wished to present to the public the new tonal systems using newly constructed instruments; his theoretical and compositional progress in this respect may be seen as a step towards the institutionalization of his own innovations. The publication of his Leipzig treatise, *Neue Harmonielehre des diatonischen, chromatischen, Viertel-, Drittel-, Sechstel-, und Zwölftel-Tonsystems* in 1927 was certainly one of the turning points in his extraordinary career. As one of the most respected and influential teachers of his generation at the Prague Conservatory, he attracted students from Austria, Germany, Yugoslavia (two of the most important among them are certainly Slavko Osterc and Ljubica Marić) and beyond to his quarter-tone classes. Finally, Hába was a tireless organiser who helped to ensure that compositions of new music were regularly performed at Prague concert halls. Many of his pieces provoked a great deal

of controversy in their time, though today's listeners would certainly be able to judge his output more objectively. Hába's extensive musical oeuvre, which comprises remarkable 103 works, spans over six decades. His first composition to be assigned an opus number, *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, op. 1, was written in the spring of 1915; his last work, *Suite for Violin and Piano*, op. 103, dates from 1972, that is, one year before his death.

Although catalogues of works by Czech composers have a long tradition, there is still much to be done in this area. Yet from 2010 onward, Hába seems to have been an exception. Namely, the new catalogue of Hába's music and writings was prepared in 2010 by two Hába experts: Jiří Vysloužil, author of Hába's comprehensive biography, entitled *Život a dílo (Life and Work)* from 1974, and his much younger colleague from the Institute of Musicology at Masaryk University in Brno, Lubomír Spurný, who wrote several important articles on Hába's individual works. Although a list of Hába's compositions and writings can already be found in Vysloužil's monograph, the new catalogue offers a great improvement in comparison with the earlier one. Spurný was primarily responsible for its preparation, and thus undoubtedly holds the most merit for its publication.

The catalogue is arranged systematically. Divided by genres or performing forces, it consists of twelve sections; the works are listed chronologically in each section. Because some of Hába's works are difficult to date precisely, they are listed alphabetically. The abbreviations are appropriate and also sufficiently intuitive. The titles are given in Czech, German and English, followed by a summary of datings taken from specified autographs. Information on copies, duration, performances, editions, discography, and literature is also included for each work. Where necessary, additional details have been provided. For example, the operas have additional sections for libretto, setting, and cast; vocal works have a section for texts, etc. The layout provides sufficient space between sections so the reader should not have any problems to find the information required. The literature containing author date references relating to the more than 150-item bibliography is particularly impressive. There are seven indexes to be found at the end of the catalogue. These include a Systematic and Chronological Index of Hába's Works, an Index of

Original and English Titles of Hába's Works, a Personal Index and Index of Places, Institutions and Anonymous Works, and finally, an Index of Text Incipits of Hába's Works. It is therefore clear, for instance, that Hába wrote only a small number of his compositions in the microtonal systems (55 quarter-, 10 sixth-, and one fifth-tone compositions), while all of his other compositions are in the diatonic and chromatic systems. On the other hand, in some of his more complex works, such as the sixteen string quartets, six are in the quarter-tone system, three in the sixth-tone system, and one is in the fifth-tone system. The catalogue begins with a five-page timeline of his activities and ends with a selection of Hába's autographs. The composer's curriculum vitae can rarely be found in similar catalogues. We can therefore simply hope that Spurný's new edition will be a new Hába biography in a foreign language that will throw additional light on the life and work of this unique and important composer of the Central European interwar avant-garde.

*Jernej Weiss*

